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SUBJECT: SOCIAL DEMOCRATS LINE UP TO LEAD PARTY INTO NOVEMBER ELECTIONS

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Croatia's Social Democratic Party (SDP) will choose a new leader at the June 2 party conference, to replace Ivica Racan, the former PM who died last month. The candidates are Zeljka Antunovic, former deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister; Milan Bandic, current mayor of Zagreb; Tonino Picula, former Foreign Minister and current mayor of Velika Gorica; and Zoran Milanovic, current member of parliament and former diplomat. All four claim to support economic guru Ljubo Jurcic, who only recently joined the party, for the prime ministerial post should the SDP win in November - perhaps an attempt to lure potential coalition candidates who might be less inclined to work with any of the SDP presidential candidates. All four are long-time Embassy contacts who endorse Croatia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.
END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

A FIGHT TO LEAD THE PARTY, NOT NECESSARILY THE COUNTRY

¶2. (SBU) The June 2 party conference will determine who will lead the party into elections, not yet scheduled but expected in November, but all four candidates have agreed that former Economy Minister and very recent party member Ljubo Jurcic, Racan's hand-picked candidate for Prime Minister, should take the PM job if the SDP wins. Even Bandic, whose support for Jurcic was in doubt until recently, told the press May 23 that it was logical that Jurcic, as the author of the SDP's economic program, should lead the implementation of the program. The candidates - briefly described below - are holding a series of five closed-door "debates" for party members in cities around the country before the June 2 vote.

¶3. (SBU) Zeljka Antunovic: As a deputy PM and Defense Minister in the 2000-2003 SDP-led coalition government, and a long-time member of party leadership circles, Antunovic has broad support within the party, and national name-recognition. An MP since 2003, she represents continuity with Racan's political philosophy, and was the natural choice as interim party leader six months ago when Racan's illness forced him to step down. She is a moderate, articulate, center-left politician, but is sometimes seen as quarrelsome and can be defensive when criticized, qualities which would not help her in the contest against PM Sanader and his ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ).

¶4. (SBU) Milan Bandic: Mayor of Zagreb, Croatia's largest city with some 800,000 inhabitants, Bandic is an action-oriented populist, loved by the SDP's working-class urban constituents but less highly regarded by intellectuals and those who hold his Herzegovinan roots against him. Clever but no intellectual himself, Bandic has a man-of-the-people approach some find offensive, addressing most people in this still rather formal culture by their first names, and using the grammatical familiar. He may be counting on his ties to Herzegovina to siphon some of the normally right-wing diaspora vote there, which can vote in Croatian elections, from the HDZ. He has also recently been courting the Church for support. Nevertheless,

Bandic is not well-liked within the SDP, and could not muster enough votes four years ago to make it into the party leadership. Although he could probably carry Zagreb against the HDZ, that possibility may not make him attractive enough to win the party presidency.

¶5. (SBU) Tonino Picula: Former Foreign Minister, now mayor of Croatia's fifth-largest city, Picula spent the coalition years in Racan's shadow but has been carving out an identity of his own since the 2005 municipal elections. Formerly seen as an intellectual, he has demonstrated a more operationally effective side as mayor of the Zagreb bedroom community of Velika Gorica (pop. 35,000). Unassuming and lacking in charisma, Picula may have an outside chance of winning the SDP contest, but he could not compete with PM Sanader.

¶6. (SBU) Zoran Milanovic: Former diplomat and member of parliament since 2003, the 41-year-old Milanovic is the only candidate representing a new generation of politicians who came of age after Croatian independence. A well-educated lawyer, Milanovic has a good understanding of issues like EU and NATO membership, but sometimes appears arrogant. He is not a favorite of the SDP "old guard", having joined the party only in 1999 in what was seen by some as an opportunistic move ahead of the SDP's election win. Nevertheless, the party may see his fresh face and support by young people and intellectuals as its best hope against the Sanader-led HDZ.

BRADTKE